

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Cold Sassy Tree

by

### Olive Burns

### Book Information

Olive Burns, Cold Sassy Tree

Quiz Number: 7106

Dell, 1984

ISBN 0-440-21272-3; LCCN

471 Pages

Book Level: 5.3

Interest Level: UG

When the preacher of Cold Sassy, Georgia, elopes with a woman half his age, not to mention, a Yankee, the sleepy little town comes alive.

**Topics:** Community Life, Misc./Other; Humor/Funny, Funny; Interpersonal Relationships, Neighbors; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; U.S. States/Regions, Georgia

### Main Characters

Aunt Loma a strong-willed, spoiled, and vain young woman and daughter of Grandpa Blakeslee

Camp (Campbell) Williams Loma's unintelligent and lazy husband

Campbell Junior Aunt Loma and Camp's baby boy

Grandpa Blakeslee (Rucker) tight-fisted proprietor of Cold Sassy's General Store and Love's husband

Hoyt Tweedy Will's kind-hearted pa

Loomis Mr. Blakeslee's hired man

Love Simpson Grandpa Blakeslee's new bride, a beautiful, fun-loving, and determined woman with a fine head for business

Mary Toy Will's little sister

Mary Willis Tweedy Will's mama and daughter of Grandpa Blakeslee

Miss Mattie Lou (Granny) Grandpa Blakeslee's first wife

Queenie housekeeper and cook for the Tweedys

Will Tweedy the story-teller, a fourteen-year-old boy, grandson of Rucker Blakeslee

### Vocabulary

**creosote** heavy, oily liquid with a smoky smell, obtained from coal tar or wood tar used chiefly as a wood preservative

**muscadine** a grape of the southern U.S. with musky fruits borne in small clusters

**scuppernong** a white aromatic table wine made from scuppernongs

**terrapin** any of various kinds of web-footed turtles of North and Central America having shells covered with horny shields

### Synopsis

Will Tweedy is a fourteen-year-old boy living in the small town of Cold Sassy, Georgia, in 1906. Through the boy's keen observations and recollections years later, readers become immersed in the boy's life and the lives of his relatives and neighbors.

When Will's Grandpa Blakeslee, the proprietor of the general store, marries the young and beautiful "Yankee," Love Simpson, just three weeks after the death of his wife, the beloved Granny Blakeslee, all of Cold Sassy is in shock. Thinking their father is being disrespectful to their mother's memory, Will's mother, Mary Willis, and his Aunt Loma are especially appalled by their father's decision to marry. Knowing that the citizens of the town will see their father's marriage as a disgrace, and worried that Love Simpson will ruin their inheritance, both women abhor their father's decision. Consequently, they are cold and critical toward Love Simpson.

While others condemn Love, Will Tweedy is happy about his Grandfather Blakeslee's marriage. The boy is charmed by Love's lively personality and beauty. He enjoys her friendship, and although he deeply misses his Grandma Blakeslee, he is relieved that his grandfather has a companion. The relationship intrigues Will, and as a result, he follows its development closely. Will is the first to learn that Love and Grandpa's marriage is one of convenience, Grandpa wanting a cook and housekeeper and Love wanting a home and family connection. When Will learns that Love is sleeping in the "company room," he realizes that the

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relationship is platonic. Later, as Will chauffeurs Love and Grandpa in Grandpa's new Pierce, he is touched by their show of affection and intimacy. Will is also the first to know when Love is expecting.

Although Grandpa Blakeslee and Love's marriage is clearly the major focus of the novel, the book is rich with subplots. Will's stories weave an intricate tapestry about the people in Cold Sassy. In one such subplot, Will struggles with his feelings for pretty Lightfoot McLendon, a "linthead" from Mill Town. In one scene, he is caught kissing her passionately in the cemetery. Later, he is whipped for associating with a girl beneath his social status. Will's frustration builds when Lightfoot tells him that she plans to marry Hosie, a mill boy Will dislikes.

Another subplot involves Loma, Will's beautiful and strong-willed aunt. To spite her father, Grandpa Blakeslee, for not allowing her to become an actress, Loma has married Camp, a poor, slow-witted, and lazy man. Unhappy with her husband and her lifestyle, Loma henpecks Camp unmercifully. When life becomes unbearable for him, Camp commits suicide.

Humorous and happy stories are interwoven throughout the novel as well. For instance, Will remembers his father driving up to the church in his brand-new, red Cadillac. He also tells about the arrival of his grandfather's shiny, black Pierce. Another story involves Will and his friends releasing a large number of rats during a performance of Loma's Christmas play.

Although *Cold Sassy Tree* portrays life in a small, gossipy southern town, it more importantly explores the human experience. As Will Tweedy comes of age, he experiences love, joy, death, hate, and humiliation. After Grandpa Blakeslee dies, Love tells Will that he is so like his grandfather and says, "By knowing you, my new son will know his father." With the upcoming birth of Grandpa and Love's child comes the hope of renewed family unity and a new generation.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Will thought Miss Love was a lively and beautiful woman. In fact, he was quite smitten with her. Give some examples where Will's feelings for Miss Love are evident.

*He becomes jealous of the cowboy when he kisses Miss Love. He drinks from the same side of the cup Miss Love's lips have touched. He says Miss Love makes him feel like a man.*

### Literary Analysis

*Cold Sassy Tree* is set in Georgia in 1906. How is the setting reflected in the book?

*The characters speak with a Southern dialect and have certain attitudes about blacks. Many of the character names are unique to the South. Small town gossip runs rampant. Inventions of the time, such as Grandpa's Pierce, are given importance.*

### Inferential Comprehension

What was Hoyt's opinion about Grandpa Blakeslee and Miss Love's marriage?

*He realized his wife, Mary Willis, felt shamed by the marriage. However, Hoyt worked for Grandpa and thought Love was a good person. He was not openly critical. He tried to remain congenial and open-minded.*

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#### Constructing Meaning

Grandpa Blakeslee is infamous for being tight-fisted. Do you think his relationship with Miss Love makes him more generous? Support your answer with references from the book.

*Some students will say Grandpa did become more generous. He bought gifts for his family in New York and gave Miss Love birthday gifts, bought a car, and even considered getting indoor plumbing. Others might argue that the gifts he bought in New York were sale items, the car was bought to start a car business, and that his chosen style of burial showed his resistance to spending money.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Plot** In *Cold Sassy Tree*, the author conveys the excitement surrounding the introduction of the automobile to society. Hoyt's Cadillac and Grandpa Blakeslee's Pierce greatly impress the citizens of Cold Sassy. The invention of the automobile changes fashion. Miss Love wears a dust veil while riding in the car, and she makes a fashionable driving suit for Grandpa Blakeslee. The automobile changes the way people spend their leisure time as well. For instance, Miss Love and Grandpa enjoy taking rides throughout the countryside. Ask the students to research the history of the automobile. Topics of research might include: Who invented the first car? How much did the first cars cost? How many people owned automobiles in the U.S. in 1906? What was the most popular car? What were the fashions in the automobile era like? As an extension of this activity, have students research other inventions of the time, like Miss Love's Home Graphophone.

**Recognizing Plot** Grandpa Blakeslee is upset when the issue of changing Cold Sassy's name is brought up. He is proud of the history of the name. He knows that mountain wagoners named the town after a grove of sassafras trees that grew in the area. However, after Blakeslee's death, Cold Sassy's name is changed to Progressive City to sound modern. Ask students to research the place names of cities, rivers,

mountains, and other geographical places in their county or state and give brief reports on the history behind the names.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Will Tweedy is a great storyteller. When he makes up stories about Aunt Loma nursing a pig and wearing a rubber bosom, he even amuses Loma herself. To enhance student appreciation of the art of storytelling, give an assignment asking students to read a Mark Twain short story. Discuss the elements of a good story. What makes it entertaining? As an extension to this activity, invite a storyteller to come into the classroom or show a video of Hal Holbrook acting as Mark Twain. Discuss what makes a successful storyteller. Then assign the students to choose a brief story or a two-minute joke to tell to the class.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** Cold Sassy Tree is a small, gossipy town. Everyone knows everyone else's business. When the Texas cowboy comes to see Miss Love, Miss Effie Belle automatically appears on the scene to check the situation out. When Will kisses Lightfoot in the cemetery, Miss Alice Ann interrupts the couple and upbraids Will. Gossip travels like wildfire in the town, and Will and his family fear it. Discuss the negative impacts of gossip with the students. In small groups ask the students to discuss times when they or others they know were victims of gossip and what the effects were.